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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant factors in accounting for death attitudes is religious beliefs, yet this factor has been little studied or understood. This study examined the relationship between death anxiety, religiosity, and life satisfaction among a sample of retired older individuals. Sixty retired subjects between the ages of 60 and 84 years were administered Faulkner and DeJong's Religiosity scale, the Templer-McMordie scale to measure death anxiety, and the Life Satisfaction Index A. Subjects also reported their religious affiliation and identified themselves as Christians, non-Christians, or Born Again Christians. Data were analyzed using both bivariate and multiple regression analyses. Findings revealed that subjects who labeled themselves as Born Again Christians scored significantly lower on death anxiety than did subjects who described themselves as Christians, but not Born Again. Additionally, lower religiosity scores were significantly correlated with higher death anxiety. Finally, more conservative/fundamentalist subjects had significantly lower death anxiety scores than did other subjects. Multiple regression analysis yielded a significant multiple R for death anxiety scores including denominational affiliation and three scores from the religiosity measure. (Author/NB)

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Death Anxiety and Religiosity Among An Older Adult Population

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Running head: DEATH ANXIETY AND RELIGIOSITY

Abstract

Subjects included 60 male and female retired individuals between the ages of 60 to 84. All participants were administered questionnaires concerning death anxiety, religiosity, and life satisfaction. Data were analyzed using both bivariate and multiple regression analyses.

Findings revealed that subjects who labeled themselves as "born again" Christians scored significantly lower on death anxiety than subjects who described themselves as Christian, but not "born again". Additionally, lower religiosity scores were significantly correlated with higher death anxiety. Finally, more conservative/fundamentalist subjects had significantly lower death anxiety scores. Multiple regression analysis yielded a significant multiple R for death anxiety scores including denominational affiliation and 3 scores from the religiosity measure.

Results were interpreted in relation to other recent reports in the literature on death anxiety and religiosity (e.g. Downey, 1984; Leming, 1980).

Death Anxiety and Religiosity Among an Older Adult Population

While the death experience has been a topic of scrutiny by philosophers, theologians and scientists since recorded history, one of the most significant factors in accounting for death attitudes, that is, religious beliefs, has been little studied or understood. Most, if not all religions have attempted to provide some rationale for understanding and coping more effectively with the anticipation of death. Yet, while religious belief systems typically involve specific statements regarding death, empirical investigations of death attitudes and death anxiety have only infrequently looked at the role of religious beliefs in moderating the experience of death anxiety. Previous research (e.g. Cerney, 1977; Fried-Cassorla, 1981; Iammarino, 1975; Young & Daniels, 1981) in this area has either failed to utilize multidimensional assessment of religiosity, and/or has not sampled an older population where coping with death anxiety is perhaps of most significance.

The present research examined the relationship between death anxiety, religiosity and life satisfaction among a sample of retired older individuals. One thesis of the present research is that a fundamentalist "Christian" belief system will moderate death anxiety. Doctrinal Christian beliefs, for example, through the concept of the resurrection and after life, offer the believer the

perspective that death is a transition to a new life, and not an end state. Both old and new testament scripture consistently support this position (e.g. I Corinthians, 15:55; Isaiah, 25:8; John 3:3; I Peter, 1:3; Romans, 6:8) thus providing the believer with specific doctrinal beliefs, as well as a community of fellow believers, to suppport and reinforce this cognitive perspective on death.

Previous research which has addressed the relationship between death attitudes and religious beliefs reflects great diversity across subject selection, fear of death measures, and religiosity indices. Those studies which have focused on a Christian population have also varied significantly in terms of how Christian identification was determined. This nonsystematic approach has, not suprisingly, led to conflicting results in which every possible relationship between the variables of religiosity and death fear has been reported (Lester, 1977).

An early work by Leming (1976) investigated the effects of religiosity upon death concerns. Using Boyar's (1964) Fear of Death scale and a religiosity index on a sample of middle age, largely Mormon subjects, evidence was found to support Homan's theory of a curvilinear relationship between religiosity and death concern. That is, individuals who were either very religious or non-religious had a tendency to display lower death anxiety than individuals who were moderately religious. Leming later replicated these findings using a random sample of rural Minnesota

respondents (Leming, 1980). McMordie (1981), and Downey (1984), also found a curvilinear relationship between fear of death and religiosity with individuals having moderate religiosity scores evidencing significantly higher fear of death than individuals who indicated they were either very low or highly religious. On the other hand, Fraker (1984) found a strong linear inverse relationship between religiosity and death anxiety. Specifically, degree of belief in a beneviolent God or immortality was inversely related to anxiety regarding death. Interestingly, Fraker found death anxiety to be lowest among the Protestant sample where doctrinal themes involving forgiveness, salvation and life after death are significant, and highest death anxiety among the conservative Jewish sample where doctrinal themes of are prevalent.

Fried-Cassorla (1981) differentiated religious conviction into extrinsic religiosity (e.g., religion serves to establish one as a moral person in the community), from intrinsic religiosity (religious beliefs expressed in all aspects of a person's life). She found that undergraduate students with high extrinsic religiosity scores also scored high on a measure of death anxiety. On the other hand, subjects with high intrinsic religiosity scores had less conscious death concerns. Cerny (1975) also used a multidimensional approach in studying the relationship of death anxiety to religiosity. He defined "Christians" as only those "persons who know that they were 'born again'",

as opposed to "non-Christians". Using this definition, he found that the Christian group showed significantly lower fear of death scores than the non-Christian group. Cerny noted that his results suggest that being "born again...is possibly the most significant factor in relationship to death perspectives and religious orientation which has been identified." Finally, Young and Daniels (1981), utilized the Templer Death Anxiety Scale (1970), the Faulkner and DeJong Religiosity Scale (1966), and measures of religious affiliation (e.g. liberal, fundamentalist, etc.) and "born-again status", in a multiple regression approach to the analysis of predictors of death anxiety. They found that the intellectual and ideological scales of the Faulkner and DeJong Scale, as well as born again status, were signficant predictors of death anxiety. Additionally it was found that subjects with more liberal denominational affiliations exhibited greater death anxiety while subjects who identified themselves as "born again" exhibited significantly less death anxiety.

The present study utilized both uni-dimensional and multi-dimensional measures of religiosity. It addressed the relationships between death anxiety, religiosity, and life satisfaction among a sample of older adult individuals. This study represented a partial replication of Young and Daniel's (1981) investigation with an enhanced measure of death anxiety as well as a measure of life satisfaction. Recent research (Koenig, Kvale & Ferrel, 1988; Spreitzer &

Snyder, 1974) has established that life satisfaction or well being is strongly correlated with measures of religiosity and other factors among the elderly. The present research utilized an older adult sample where death anxiety is perhaps of more significance than within the general population (Erikson, 1963). Specifically, the following predictions were made: 1) subjects who self report more liberal denominational affiliations would exhibit higher death anxiety scores; 2) subjects who identify themselves as born again Christians would exhibit lower death anxiety; 3) subjects with lower scores on each of the dimensions of the Faulkner and DeJong religiosity scale would have lower death anxiety scores; and 4) subjects with higher life satisfaction scores would display lower death anxiety.

Method

Subjects

The participants of this investigation included 60 men and women who ranged in age from 60 to 84 years (M=67) from two retirement communities in Central Florida. Participation was limited to those individuals who were at least 60 years of age and who were free from obvious intellectual or emotional impairment that would preclude valid completion of the research instruments.

Instrumentation

The Faulkner and DeJong's Religiosity scale (1966) was used to assess religiosity. This scale is based on Glock's (1962) theoretical framework and includes 5 dimensions of

religiosity: ideological, ritualistic, experiential, intellectual, and consequential. The scale consists of 23 Guttman-type scaled items. Scores range from 23 to 80 with higher scores indicating less reported religiosity. Additionally, subjects were asked to self-report their religious affiliation. A variety of common denominational affiliations (e.g., Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, etc.) have previously (Peterson & Mauss, 1976 in Fraker, 1984) been categorized as either liberal, moderate, or fundamentalist. Participants were also asked to identify themselves as either "Born Again" Christian, Christian but not "Born Again", or Non-Christian/Other.

Death anxiety was assessed using the Templer-McMordie scale (McMordie, 1979; Templer, 1970). This scale consists of 15 items to which subjects respond on a 7-point scale ranging from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree. Scores range from 15 (low death anxiety) to 105 (high death anxiety).

Finally, life satisfaction was measured by the Life Satisfaction Index A (Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961). This index consists of 20 items to which respondents agree, disagree or state uncertainty. Total scores range from 20 to 60, with perceived life satisfaction increasing as scores increase.

Procedures

A small pilot investigation was undertaken to better anticipate participants' reactions to the questionnaires

utilized. Careful debriefing of these pilot subjects suggested that there would be no adverse reactions to the use of the assessment instruments and questions described above. Permission was obtained from the management of two retirement communities to make a presentation about the research project at open community meetings of residents. Following a presentation in which the principal investigator delineated the nature of the project, an informed consent to participate in a research project form (APA, 1981) was distributed to residents. This consent form was reviewed and interested residents were invited to ask questions and to indicate their willingness to participate further in the study by signing the form. Those residents who completed the informed consent form were then given a packet of research instruments to complete. Participants completed the research instruments individually and returned the completed forms to a secure box provided for this purpose.

Results

Of the 60 individuals who volunterred to participate in the research project, 53 produced usable, complete sets of data for analysis. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for the Religiosity, Death Anxiety, and Life Satisfaction variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

Bivariate correlational analyses were completed based on those individuals who indicated some religious denominational affiliation. Table 2 presents the bivariate correlation matrix for all variables based on these 42 subjects. Inspection of Table 2 reveals significant

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Insert Table 2 about here

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negative correlations (r's=-.45 to -.58, p's <.001) between self-reported denominational affiliation and scores on the Faulkner-DeJong (F-D) religiosity scale. Thus, the more conservative or fundamental subjects reported their religious affilation to be, the higher (i.e. more religiosity) their obtained scores on the T-M scale. Religiosity (Total F-D scores) was significantly correlated with Templer-McMordie (T-M) death anxiety scores. That is, subjects with lower religiosity scores reported significantly higher death anxiety (r=.50, p<.001). Additionally, more conservative/fundamentalist subjects had significantly lower death anxiety scores (r=-.62, p<.001).

Further analysis of the data presented in Table 2 reveals that subjects reporting themselves to be "Born Again Christians", had significantly higher F-D religiosity scores (r=-.65, p<.001), and significantly lower T-M death anxiety scores (r=.50, p<.001). On the other hand, subjects who reported themselves to be Christian but Not Born Again, had signficantly lower religiosity scores (r=.65, p<.001) and

significantly higher death anxiety scores (r=.50, p<.001). There were no significant correlations between life satisfaction scores and any other variables.

A multiple regression analysis using a backwards solution (POUT) was also completed for subjects who indicated some religious affiliation. Scores on the death anxiety scale served as the dependent variable while scores on the following eight factors were included as predictor variables: 5 subscales from the F-D Religiosity Scale (Ideological, Intellectual, Ritualistic, Experiential, Consequential); Denominational Affiliation, Life Satisfaction, and Christian Status. The final regression equation resulted in a multiple R of .72, $F(4,37)$=9.98, p=.0000, after four of the original independent variables had been dropped from the regression equation (POUT criterion, p<.10). The four remaining variables found to make significant independent contributions in predicting death anxiety scores were: denominational affiliation (sr= -.41, t= -3.58, p=.001), intellectual subscale (sr= -.25, t= -2.20, p=.03), ritualistic subscale (sr=-.20, t= -1.74, p=.09), and experiential subscale (sr= -.24, t= -2.10, p=.04).

Discussion

Life Satisfaction, somewhat surprisingly, did not appear to be related to death anxiety or any of the other variables under investigation. This appears to suggest that among our older sample of individuals, their perception of

the general quality of their lives was independent of their religious views or attitudes/concerns regarding the anticipation of death. The overall high positive levels on the life satisfaction measure (M= 51.44) and small variability (S.D.= 5.44) among the scores, for this sample, may account for its inability to function as a significant predictor of death anxiety.

The results did provide strong support for the hypothesis that individuals who report more liberal denominational affiliations experience higher levels of death concerns than individuals who report affiliation with more conservative or fundamentalist religious groups. Examination of the data revealed a significant negative correlation between denominational affiliation and death anxiety (r= -.62). Additionally, multiple regression analysis revealed that denominational affiliation made a significant independent contribution to the prediction of death anxiety. The findings also supported the expectation that individuals who identify themselves as "born again" Christians experience less death concerns than Christians who do not identify themselves as "born again". Homan (in Leming, 1976) speculated that religious philosophy and doctrine may, in fact, increase death anxiety for some individuals who focus on teachings which stress a final judgement and retribution for immorality. Homan appears to suggest, however, that once individuals fully incorporate the doctrinal beliefs of of their faith, they will

experience relief from anxiety. Thus, individuals who identify themselves as "fundamentalist" or "born again" may perceive themselves as more fully embracing the tenets of their religious affiliation and therefore more likely to report less concern or anxiety about death.

The expectation of significant relationships between each of the subscales of the Faulkner and DeJong's Religiosity Scale and death anxiety was partially supported. Total religiosity scores (combined across subscales) were signficantly correlated with lower death anxiety scores (r= .50) such that individuals who perceived themselves as more religious were lower on death anxiety. Additionally, multiple regression analysis revealed that scores on the ritualistic, experiential, and intellectual subscales were signficant independent contributors to the prediction of death anxiety scores. Interestingly, the intellectual subscale was also included as one of two significant predictors of death anxiety in the Young and Daniels (1981) investigation. Analysis of item content on the intellectual subscale of the F-D scale suggests that subjects with low scores on this scale (i.e., higher religiosity scores) hold very conservative, fundamentalist Judeo-Christian views (e.g.: How do you personally view the story of creation as recorded in Genesis?; Would you write the names of the four Gospels?). Thus, the inclusion of this subscale as a significant predictor of death concerns is consistent with previously reported findings that individuals who identify

themselves as more conservative &/or "born again" in their religious affiliation/belief, are more likely to report lower anxiety regarding the anticipation of death (Cerney, 1977). These results are also consistent with other reports (Downey, 1984; Leming, 1976, 1980; McMordie, 1981) and suggest that the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety is complex, and necessitates differentiation among those individuals who perceive themselves to be religious. Future research might also include more behaviorally based measures of strength of religious commitment to further delineate this relationship. Additionally, research needs to address strength of religiosity among non-Christian faith systems. In conclusion, this study has established that conservative/fundamentalist Christian religious affiliation, and perceiving oneself as a "born again" Christian, moderate experienced levels of death anxiety among an older adult, largely retired, sample of individuals.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Religiosity, Death Anxiety, and Life Satisfaction Variables

Variables	*M*	*SD*
Total Religiosity	36.39	12.97
Ideological	7.29	2.98
Intellectural	6.56	2.94
Ritualistic	8.95	3.68
Experiential	7.49	2.50
Consequential	6.40	2.23
Death Anxiety	52.85	11.93
Life Satisfaction	51.44	5.44

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations for Subjects Indicating Some Denominational Affiliation

Variables:	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
V1	1.00	.88**	.93**	.87**	.88**	.83**
V2	.88**	1.00	.83**	.69**	.70**	.69**
V3	.93**	.83**	1.00	.73**	.82**	.72**
V4	.88**	.69**	.73**	1.00	.71**	.65**
V5	.88**	.70**	.82**	.71**	1.00	.68**
V6	.83**	.69**	.72**	.65**	.68**	1.00
DAF	-.58**	-.50**	-.53**	-.45*	-.54**	-.56**
DA	.50**	.38*	.37*	.50**	.54**	.44*
LS	-.05	-.02	-.05	-.21	-.01	-.00
BAC	-.65**	-.50**	-.60**	-.53**	-.63**	-.61**
C	.65**	.50**	.60**	.53**	.63**	.61**

n = 42 1-tailed significance: * p<.01; ** p<.001

Variables:	DAF	DA	LS	BAC	C
V1	-.58**	.50**	-.05	-.65**	.65**
V2	-.50**	.38*	-.02	-.50**	.50**
V3	-.53**	.37*	-.05	-.60**	.60**
V4	-.45*	.50**	-.21	-.53**	.53**
V5	-.54**	.54**	-.01	-.63**	.63**
V6	-.56**	.44*	-.00	-.61**	.61**
DAF	1.00	-.62**	-.02	.44*	-.44*
DA	-.62**	1.00	-.23	-.50**	.50**
LS	-.02	-.23	1.00	.17	-.17
BAC	.44*	-.50**	.17	1.00	-1.00**
C	-.44*	.50**	-.17	-1.00**	1.00

n = 42 1-tailed significance: * p<.01; ** p<.001

V1 Total Religiosity
V2 Ideological
V3 Intellectual
V4 Ritualistic
V5 Experiential
V6 Consequential

DAF Denominational Affiliation
DA Death Anxiety
LS Life Satisfaction
BAC Born Again Christian
C Christian